

Travel Trends

Agritourism Taking Off In California's Sonoma County

(NAPSA)—A soft, furry llama ambles over to the fence rail and presents her nose for rubbing. A newborn California quarter horse suddenly props himself up on stilt-like legs and wobbles over to his mother. Dew sparkles on a rolling hillside of Zinfandel vines at first light. A side-panel truck drops off freshly picked olives at the community press. Hundreds of shadows dance across the still, warm gardens of a butterfly sanctuary.

Sound idyllic? It's all found along the byways, garden paths and river roads of California's Sonoma County, and serves as a prime example of an emerging travel trend: agritourism.

Agritourism is loosely defined as nature-based activities that support sustainable, agricultural diversity and increase public awareness concerning the preservation of rural heritage. To those in Sonoma County and countless more rural destinations across the country, agritourism means letting visitors come to their unique farms, ranches, mills, workshops and wineries to check things out, see how the work is done and perhaps discover a hand-crafted sculpture, a homegrown native plant, juicy organic heirloom tomato or vintage Cabernet.

Each corner of the country puts its own stamp on what defines local agritourism. No two destinations are the same, each offering a homegrown set of signature experiences and commodities. In Sonoma County, agritourism is manifested in farm stays where kids can feed goats, pet llamas or ride horseback through giant coastal redwoods. Here, too, are harvest festivals and fresh produce, beekeepers and herbal healing, plus the opportunity to taste some of the best wines



Nature-based activities are an increasingly popular part of many vacations.

in the world.

In short, Sonoma County's agritourism repertory features an amazing cast of players in a breathtakingly diverse landscape which stretches from its salt-mist Pacific Ocean headlands, inland to the sun-bleached, oak-studded valleys.

Sonoma County's location—35 miles north of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge—is a paradigm for country and city experiences defining one another. Travelers can pair the cosmopolitan allure of one of the world's most beautiful cities with the pastoral vistas, rolling farmland and contemplative country roads linking the area's towns and hamlets. With innumerable lodging options—from country inns to farmhouses to four-star hotels—visitors can immerse themselves in natural splendor and have unforgettable encounters with the local culture.

At its essence, it's about getting back to nature. For more information, including a detailed map and guide to the region's agritourism attractions, call the Sonoma County Tourism Program toll-free at (800) 576-6662 or go to www.sonomacounty.com, the official travel Web site.